

# **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the John C. Stennis Space Center**

## **An Oral History**

**with**

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver**



With photo of her father, Capt. William C. Fortune, center

**John C. Stennis Space Center  
History Project**

**Interviewer: Daphne Alford**

**July 21, 2011**

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*This is an oral history interview with Wealtha Fortune Weaver, the daughter of Capt. William C. Fortune, the first center director of the Mississippi Test Operations, now known as the John C. Stennis Space Center. This interview is being conducted on July 21, 2011, in conjunction with the center's 50th anniversary celebration. The interviewer is Daphne Alford.*

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** This year, being the 50th anniversary of the Mississippi Test Facility, now called the John C. Stennis Center, I wrote this article on behalf of my father, who was Capt. William C. Fortune, the founding director. Fifty years ago, he was one of the pioneers who planted the seed of vision for NASA space rockets test facility, along with Wernher von Braun and the other involved scientists and other dynamic individuals who made up the basic crew – the team members who were carefully picked and worked in almost primitive conditions of the test site, which was a wilderness in the beginning.

The Wolf and Pearl rivers were wild. The terrain was pure jungle, except for where the locals lived. When you came out to the site, you mostly felt as if you were in uncharted territory in a foreign land. And as you would recall, the local communities were displaced through eminent domain so that the test facility could be built.

Dad would bring my sister and I out onto the grounds on the weekends when we were home from college so we could see what was planned and what was going on. For two young college ladies from the eastern United States, now attending the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, getting chased by wild wart hogs was a really new and different experience.

We had never seen the likes of Spanish moss or so many bugs or shrimp out of the cocktail bowl, having so many legs and feelers. We were thrust into a part of the country that was in great change with the Freedom Riders, the Ku Klux Klan. Being told by my southern boyfriend I couldn't ride in the back of the bus, I asked “why?” When President Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, our world stopped. I will never forget it. I had to go to the Hattiesburg Courthouse and demand that they lower the flag to half mast. We went home to Pass Christian and watched the news coverage on TV with mother and dad.

So, the world was changing all around us with the death of President Kennedy, and the test site was being challenged with a new president in office, but the test site went forward. Fortunately, after the death of President Kennedy, the NASA programs continued in the Johnson Administration and onward. The federal government searched to find land that was big enough for the test site without disturbing local towns and residents, as mentioned before.

The original NASA team at the test site felt such sympathy for the people who had lived in the test site area for generations and had to move. Yes, there was so much history involved in the

creation of this site. But what I want to emphasize was NASA's vision in the early 1960s, Wernher von Braun and his fellow scientist had a vision for this space program. As I mentioned, it was supported by the Kennedy administration, and NASA had the opportunity to put these scientists' plans into reality. Part of this vision was to have the right team of pioneers.

How Wernher von Braun found my dad and chose him to be the founding director? Dad was a graduate of the United States Naval Academy, class of 1933, and after required naval ship maneuvers earned his master's in aeronautical engineering at MIT, he received his flight training at Pensacola Naval Air Station, and his career in the Navy was as a scientist and an aviator. He flew planes off the early aircraft carriers and jets later in his life.

Dad was a visionary in his own career, working with wind tunnel experimentation, initial on the first satellite launch, other rocket launches, and had actually met Mr. von Braun the first time at a NATO meeting probably in the early 1950s in Europe. Wernher followed dad's career in the Navy and knew that dad was the perfect person with his scientific background and personality that allowed him to get along with anyone to navigate both the state and federal governments for the new test site, which was so critical for the success of the test site.

Consequently, when dad was stationed at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey, doing catapult and arresting gear research, Wernher contacted him and the plans began to develop the Mississippi Test Facility. That was about 1961. It was an exciting time living in the '60s, because intellectualism flourished. The military was very respected, and NASA utilized this relationship. Dad was put on loan to NASA from the United States Navy. His rank was as a captain.

Headquarters for NASA was located in Huntsville, Alabama, and the first year of planning the test site with my dad occurred there. While driving to Huntsville from New Jersey, my parents were involved in a terrible automobile accident in Knoxville, Tennessee. Even though they had moved over to the far shoulder off the road, the crazy driver still plowed right into them, killing two people in his car. My mother had to be hospitalized for long time with broken feet and ribs. Dad was lucky, however, having been in the passenger seat. His teeth were pushed back about half an inch but he didn't suffer any broken bones.

Why I speak of this is because the people in the south are so kind, took our family cat in who was in the car, along with a small lemon tree. And my mother spoke of how kind and gracious Wernher and all the other scientists were to her and dad in Huntsville, while mother recuperated in a wheelchair. It was something they never forgot.

So, for that year in Huntsville in 1961-62, final plans were being made for the test facility in Hancock County. A group of adventurous pioneer scientists were living out their dreams that have continued to be the culmination of the Stennis Center as it is today. These men were real, live, dashing heroes of strong character and direction. Their brilliant contributions to science came to fruition. My father would be so excited to see the growth of the test site today and the courage of NASA administrators who don't listen to naysayers but keep finding ways to explore the outer limits of our world. Thank goodness for the Kennedy administration, thank goodness for the foresight of NASA and Wernher von Braun and all the other hardworking employees that have made the Stennis Center what it is today.

I am so very proud to speak of my father and my family, and dad would be so proud to see the original vision of NASA's plan for man's exploration to space and the space programs' contributions to new technology continues to flourish and grow at this great site here at Stennis Center.

[Informal talk]

**Daphne Alford:** I want you to take me back to 1961 when you first set foot on Mississippi soil.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** That was 1963.

**Daphne Alford:** OK, and you were a young lady.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** College student.

**Daphne Alford:** Pass Christian was the home?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes, that's right.

**Daphne Alford:** 100 Barkley

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Drive.

**Daphne Alford:** Drive. What was it like?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** It was a great culture shot because I was going to college in New Jersey, and my sister was going to college in New York State. So when we came down here, it was very hot and humid, and there were many foods that we had never experienced before – like grits.

[Informal talk]

**Daphne Alford:** Did you eat catfish with it?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Catfish wasn't as popular back then. We mostly just looked at them. They weren't really considered edible back then. But we have many wonderful times wading out into the shadow waters in Pass Christian, the gulf and catching flounder, crabs. We loved shrimp. But I had never seen little feelers and legs before. That was a big shock because I always had shrimp cocktail right out of the cocktail bowl.

**Daphne Alford:** So what were the neighbors like?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Very friendly.

**Daphne Alford:** Did you ever meet any people from the former towns like Logtown, Gainesville, don't remember?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I don't remember. Of course, my father did. He was very sympathetic and kind to the people, and he did his best to buffer their hardship in any way that he could.

**Daphne Alford:** So your family was considered the first NASA family.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Correct.

**Daphne Alford:** Your parents were obviously well liked, and I would say socialites, too.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes, the coast embraced them, and the new development, especially due to Leo Seal, the president of Hancock Bank, who was completely behind the development of the test side.

**Daphne Alford:** And I think Leo Seal referred to ... made the statement that your dad was an officer and a gentleman.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He certainly was. I am so proud of my father. He definitely was an officer and a gentleman.

**Daphne Alford:** And do you recall the days, I think he was in with the Navy, as you stated earlier, he would wear his uniform, right?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He still was in the Navy when he came down here. I believe it was late 1964 or '65 when he formally retired from the Navy, and then he continued on as a civil servant as you were with NASA.

**Daphne Alford:** So was it mandatory for him to wear his uniform while he was . . .

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** While he was in the Navy.

**Daphne Alford:** OK, and working here at NASA.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** For special occasions especially, for special occasions, yes.

**Daphne Alford:** And you mentioned that you and your sister would come out, was that your older sister?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** No, it was my younger sister. My older sister at that time was married and lived in Los Angeles. And my younger sister ...

**Daphne Alford:** So this was Laurie?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes, Laurie and I came down from eastern colleges. They wanted us to go to a Mississippi university for good state and federal relations. And so we enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. That was a great shock to us, too, because a lot of women were there to get their MRS instead of their BS or BA.

**Daphne Alford:** And what was your major?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I majored in English and theater, and I received my degree in elementary education and later taught school in Ocean Springs for a year or two in Gulfport before that. And I have been very fortunate growing up that I was able to study theater and dance in New York City as a young woman before we moved down to Mississippi.

**Daphne Alford:** So did your dad encourage you to go into education?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Actually, our family has a history of education. His father was the superintendent of schools, and his mother had been a schoolteacher. And his sister, dad's sister became a chemist. However, her daughter, and my cousin, became a schoolteacher. So there were several of us in education.

**Daphne Alford:** So your dad, I think I read that he was born on a reservation, where your [grand] parents taught school, right Is that . . .

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** It's located in Salamanca, New York, and that land territory was part of an Indian Reservation. My dad was very proud of that, and he thought that we could learn so much from the Indians. And so he used to say, "now if you turn your feet just a little bit when you are running, the toes in a little bit will give you a little more traction like the Indians do."

**Daphne Alford:** That's interesting.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes. And there are a lot of Indian tribes obviously from upstate New York. His parents lived along the Saint Lawrence River in Upstate New York. We had many wonderful times up there along the Saint Lawrence River.

**Daphne Alford:** So your dad was a brilliant person, I think, good in math, geography, science.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Right. The year he graduated from high school, he got the top scores in the state, and he went to the Naval Academy. He boxed there, I am trying to remember what other sports he was involved with, maybe crew, gymnastics, yes, gymnastics. And he met my mother. He saw her photo in a Washington, D.C., area newspaper, and she had won a beauty contest. And he said to his friend, "I am going to marry her." And so they were introduced by one of his other friends at an [inaudible] dance and that's how they met.

**Daphne Alford:** Oh, that was so sweet.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** And they were married in 1934, and my mother passed away in 1995. So you can see how long they were married.

**Daphne Alford:** Now how did she adapt to South Mississippi?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Well, she was always very gracious, a lovely hostess, a wonderful cook and knew how to entertain, and she dressed beautifully. So they were a wonderful couple and blended in wherever they lived.

**Daphne Alford:** Good, personalities.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes. So both my sister and I graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi, and my sister became a CPA, and my daughter is a CPA today.

**Daphne Alford:** OK, and your daughter is Sande.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Sande Lea Weaver Hentges, and my grandson is Kyle Hentges, and Sande's husband is Dan Hentges, a great guy.

**Daphne Alford:** Good. So while you were attending USM, tell me about your visits to Stennis during those days?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Well, my sister and I would come home from college. He took us out there on the weekends, and it was completely wild, just wild, wild, wild. There was only that original building that Rouchon House, and I can't remember that if that little schoolhouse. It was just basically the Rouchon House is where everything took place and the flag pole and there was . . .

**Daphne Alford:** That was the headquarters here on-site.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Right, and there was a boat dock back then at that time, and we got taken on some boat rides, and it was wild. I mean you really did feel like you were in the wilderness along the Amazon River.

**Daphne Alford:** And I want to say he was here for only like three or four years.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes.

**Daphne Alford:** And by that time, you probably completed your studies at USM?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** They had moved back to California in 1965. I graduated in 1966, and then my sister after me, she was my younger sister. And he became the West Coast director of new technology for all of the new technology that NASA had brought in from their development of the space.

**Daphne Alford:** And he was still working under von Braun?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Oh, yes, NASA, yes, he certainly was. I am sorry I can't remember the year but he retired from NASA. I apologize.

**Daphne Alford:** That's OK; it's all here. That's fine. We are not going to struggle with dates.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** What was interesting so that he wasn't the type of person to retire, retire. So after he retired from NASA, and my mother was so glad because his career just took him on so many travels and trips always that she was so glad to have him home. But he started a medical supply company with some other individuals and did that for several years before he retired, retired.

**Daphne Alford:** Did she not like to travel, your mom?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I think she was really glad they settled in Palos Verdes, [California] in a lovely home that overlooked the ocean and the city, and they were really glad to be in one place because his assignments usually, which is typical of the Navy, would change every couple years. And we had one assignment when I was growing up, and it was in Bethesda, Maryland, he was with the Bureau of Scientific or Naval Research, whatever they called it, and we were there for five years. So that was the longest assignment we had had. But we treasured every place that we lived, and we learned to appreciate no matter where we lived there was always something positive about that place.

**Daphne Alford:** So now you lived in California for several years?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes.

**Daphne Alford:** And now you are back in Ocean Springs.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** To be near my daughter and her family.

**Daphne Alford:** What did you do in California?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Well, it was interesting. When I moved to California in 1980, there weren't any teacher positions up at that time. It was because of Proposition 28, I think it was. They cut back on all the funds for teachers. So I started doing other things. I worked for corporations and then later went into legal work. And I received a degree in litigation and also my state certification in dispute resolution from the LA Bar Association. So I worked for law firms, and then I opened my own business up in the mountains in Big Bear Lake, California. And I still actually have clients part time, which is very nice. I opened that business in 1994, so it just keeps rolling along.

**Daphne Alford:** That's good.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Thank you.

**Daphne Alford:** Now let's go back to your dad. Can you remember some of the things he would say, anything you can remember? I am sure he had a personality we can tell, by the way he dressed.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Well, later in life, this is really fascinating, and you really believed him the way that he said this. He would have these wonderful conversations with Wernher von Braun, and they were so vivid that you had to believe when he was really talking to him in a great beyond. Dad was a very spiritual person, and his mind was always working. And I think I had mentioned to you when we were growing up and throughout his career, everywhere we went, he would know someone.

And when we would travel – most of his assignments would be on the East Coast or the West Coast when he was an officer in the Navy. So we would go back and forth, drive back and forth across the country, and he would take us to all the national parks and historical monuments, really everywhere. We were so fortunate. New Orleans, I don't remember that so well.

But he knew scientists, too, and in airports. If we were in an airport, he would know somebody coming through, and he took us to many of the bases when we were traveling. So it was a great time for the military.

**Daphne Alford:** A happy family.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes, thank you.

**Daphne Alford:** Von Braun, had you ever met him in person?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I think I may have. Mother and dad were so busy with dad's career, and my sister and I were in college. So a lot of times, my parents would have these big parties, and all the important people would come – the scientists, the politicians. Of course, he had dealings for NASA with state and federal government. He had to deal with congressmen and the governor. And my sister worked in Jackson for a short time before she moved out to California after she graduated from college.

And at that time, women accountants could not get a job; it was only men that were hired as accountants. So my sister did move out to California and started her career as a CPA out there. But while she was in Jackson, because they knew my father, they would invite her to stop by for lunch. So she could just go there to governor's mansion and just go in and have a sandwich and then go back to work. Wasn't that hysterical? It was a very relaxed atmosphere, very fascinating. That was in the early '60s, well, around '66 or so.

**Daphne Alford:** Well, that is so sweet. What else can you tell me about your dad?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He definitely was the visionary, as I was saying. And when he was a boy, he would look up at the stars and say, "I wish that I could go to the moon." And I think that that's interesting while he wasn't an astronaut how he became involved in that quest. His mind

was always thinking about how to resolve something, whether beyond the professional level or an office situation. Usually, it was a scientific project.

**Daphne Alford:** Well, maybe he was destined when he was a boy looking up, wishing he could go to the moon. He didn't make it there, but he made it possible for others to go to the moon.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Absolutely. I can't remember. We have some lunar memorabilia, obviously, but his mind was always on and that's why he fit in so perfectly with the NASA team and their vision.

**Daphne Alford:** So it was you and your two sisters in the family, and it's Amy Elaine Fortune Valkass.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Valkass, and she had attended a private girls school in Washington. And then when the family moved up to Lakehurst, New Jersey, for that new assignment, she went out to UCLA, and she and her husband met at an inter-fraternity party. He attended the USC, and so that's how they met. And they have two daughters that I am close to today, grown women.

**Daphne Alford:** And then you were the second daughter.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I was the middle daughter, and I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And my older sister that I just spoke of, she was born in Pensacola, Florida, when dad was having flight training there.

**Daphne Alford:** Out of all the military travels, which one was your favorite spot?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** That is hard. We lived the most in California, most time in California, so we all still love California. But we learned so much from each place and met new friends everywhere. We were stationed when I was very little in Philadelphia and then Coronado and then Pasadena when my sister and I were in elementary school. And then we moved back to Bethesda, Maryland, Chevy Chase and then to Lakehurst, and we had gone back to California in between.

That was really a fun time because that's when . . . dad was very important, and so we were given a special tour through, I think it was Warner Brothers. Doris Day was filming with John Rait, and Jimmy Stewart was filming "The Spirit of St. Louis," and we got to meet some other stars. And they were always going to beautiful parties. My mother wore her first stole. It was that time in the late 50s where the ladies did that.

And one time when we lived in Lakehurst, New Jersey, because of dad's position, people wanted to meet him. I guess maybe they thought he would give them a government contract, who knows, I have no idea. But he was just at the forefront of what he was doing, and we were some impressed. This limousine came and picked us up and took us to New York City, and it had an ice bucket with Champaign in it that also doubled as a john. It was hysterical.

But my favorite thing of that low excursion was they took us to the plaza for lunch, and I had one of the best chicken dishes I have ever had in my life. It was a creamed chicken dish. It was so good. Well, we loved being in the east because we saw all the museums, starting when we were in grammar school in Washington, the Smithsonian. I actually climbed to the top of the Washington Monument. The public schools we were in Maryland were so dynamic that they took us to the National Orchestra, ballets. It was wonderful. We loved that, we really did.

**Daphne Alford:** Now your dad's last visit on-site was in 1997. What was that visit like?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I think that was really emotional for him.

**Daphne Alford:** Oh, really?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes. And he was so glad to be here because he loved doing what he did.

**Daphne Alford:** And you accompanied your dad on that visit, along with your daughter Sande and your son.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Scott Weaver, yes.

**Daphne Alford:** He should have been proud to bring grandkids back to the place where ...

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Oh, he was. He was, and that's the year Sande graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi. Also, it was a big time.

**Daphne Alford:** So how did that come about, that visit, do you remember?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** I think I just notified them that we were coming back, and then Mr. Estess arranged to have a special meeting and party for dad. It was very nice.

**Daphne Alford:** And he went to the Rouchon House, I think.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes.

**Daphne Alford:** Because there is a story behind this photo of the three directors, along with Roy Estess and Jerry Hlass.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yes.

**Daphne Alford:** And I think he talked about some vine, some flower.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Wisteria?

**Daphne Alford:** Yes. He was disappointed that it wasn't there or something.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Oh, my dad was a great gardener. He could grow anything. Wherever they went, he would pick up rocks. So he had this huge rock collection, shells. They had shells from all their visits to different places, and plants where he was . . . where the government allowed you to bring back a plant.

**Daphne Alford:** So did he plant it there?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He had orchids and everything in his yard in Palos Verdes.

**Daphne Alford:** What about that Rouchon House, did he plant that Wisteria?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He always was planting something, so it's a little hard for me to remember. I may remember something about that plant. I think it was a big event when it was planted.

**Daphne Alford:** I think it was a parking lot where it used to be.

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Yeah.

**Daphne Alford:** But that was nice, and he talked about Annie's Restaurant?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** Oh, and it was so good, too. And we used to love it when they took us to home from college. And then for years, whenever I would be in the area living in California, I would come back, my friends and I would go there or my family until we went on our separate ways for a while.

**Daphne Alford:** So this is the year of 2011, what would your dad say about Stennis today?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** He would say he was looking down, along with Wernher and the other scientists and being really proud of how it had grown and developed and about how it's continuing to carry on in spite of our government's decisions regarding NASA. It's moving forward.

**Daphne Alford:** Anything else you would like to add to this interview?

**Wealtha Fortune Weaver:** My family is very proud to have been a part of this initial development and proud that it's continuing, and that I am glad my daughter and my grandson were able to experience this event today. So thank you very much.

**Daphne Alford:** You are welcome! I really enjoyed it.